Ambivalent Sexism at Home and at Work: How Attitudes Toward Women in Relationships Foster Exclusion in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

According to ambivalent sexism theory (AST; Glick & Fiske, 1996; 2001), sexism combines complementary gender ideologies, held by both men and women worldwide, which serve to justify social hierarchy. This chapter reviews how benevolent and hostile attitudes toward women operate in concert, ultimately maintaining gender inequity. Research specifically targets the relationship between sexism and system justification, as endorsed and enacted by men and women. Hostile and benevolent beliefs map onto widely held prescriptions and proscriptions for men and women; these beliefs shape men's and women's interactions in the private sphere (i.e., the home, close relationships). Finally, these system justifying beliefs extend to the workplace and impede women from progressing in the public sphere.

We yield to none in our admiration, veneration, and respect for woman. We recognize in her admirable and adorable qualities and sweet and noble influence which make for the betterment of mankind and the advancement of civilization. . . . We would take from women none of their privileges as citizens but we do not believe that women are adapted to the political work of the world. . . . Woman suffrage is inconsistent with the fundamental principles upon which our. . . . government was founded. . . . If woman suffrage should become universal. . . . in time of great excitement. . . . this country would be in danger of. . . . insurrections. . . . [We] should guard against emotional suffrage. What we need is to put more logic and less feeling into public affairs. . . . Suffragists insist that if woman suffrage became universal “it would set in motion the machinery of an earthly paradise.” It was a woman of high standing in the literary and journalistic field who answered, “It is my opinion that it would let loose the wheels of purgatory.” . . .
There are spheres in which feeling should be paramount... the realm of gentler and holier and kindlier attributes that make the name of wife, mother and sister... but it is not in harmony with suffrage and has no place in government.

—Nebraska Men’s Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, Omaha, 1914

Giving women the vote created neither heaven nor hell on earth. Nevertheless, we cite this admittedly quaint but sexist manifesto to illustrate the main themes of our chapter. In ambivalent sexist ideology, women are viewed as adorable and sweet, subjectively positive traits that suit them to hearth and home, but also as too emotional and insufficiently logical to accomplish the work of the world (the writers blamed even the French Revolution on women’s passions). Ambivalent sexism theory (AST) reveals, like the quotation above, how attitudes about women within heterosexual romantic relationships are part and parcel of the justifications (both subjectively benevolent and hostile) that exclude women from high-status roles outside the home. Indeed, we argue that subjectively benevolent views about women within heterosexual relationships help to make sexist ideologies acceptable (and even attractive) to many women. Although contemporary women’s (and men’s) attitudes are less extreme than those of the “woman of high standing” who feared that women’s suffrage “would let loose the wheels of purgatory,” ambivalent sexism continues to justify limiting women’s roles in the public sphere.

In this chapter, we review how benevolent and hostile attitudes toward women complement one another and give rise to discrimination against women, according to AST (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). We also consider empirical findings that help to illustrate the relationship between sexism and system justification, as endorsed and enacted by men and women. Next, we examine how hostile and benevolent beliefs map onto romanticized ideals about what men and women ought (and ought not) to be, and how these beliefs shape people’s mate preferences. Finally, we review how these system justifying beliefs spill over into the workplace and how they work to block women’s progress in the public sphere.

AMBIVALENT SEXISM: THEORY AND FINDINGS

Ambivalent sexism theory contends that sexism is not rooted in unalloyed antipathy. Rather, sexism is the combination of complementary gender ideologies, held by both men and women worldwide (Glick, et al., 2000), which serve to maintain the present social hierarchy. Benevolent sexism (BS) is a paternalistic ideology in which women are subordinate beings,
best suited for traditional, low-status roles, who need to be protected, cherished, and revered for their virtue. Hostile sexism (HS), which does express antipathy, is a combative ideology that is hostile toward women, who are viewed as seeking to control men, whether by using their sexuality or feminist ideology as a means to achieving status and power. The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) is a 22-item self report measure, which includes both benevolent and hostile subscales and assesses the extent to which people maintain benevolent and hostile attitudes toward women. Examples of benevolent items are “Men are incomplete without women,” “Women should be cherished and protected by men,” and “Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.” Hostile items include statements such as “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men,” “Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances,” and “When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.”

Hostile and benevolent sexism are the predictable products of the power differences and interdependence between men and women, which determine the nature of patriarchy, gender differentiation, and heterosexual relations; each domain reinforces the structural foundations of ambivalent sexism. Patriarchy yields paternalism, the ideological justification of male dominance. The hostile elements of patriarchy are based in dominative paternalism, the belief that men ought to have more power than women and the fear that women might usurp men’s power. In complement, the benevolent elements of patriarchy are based in protective paternalism, the belief that men need to protect and provide for the women on whom they depend.

Gender differentiation refers to the social distinctions all cultures make between men and women and the importance of gender identity in social hierarchy (Harris, 1991). Competitive gender differentiation justifies women’s lower status through stereotypes of their inherent inferiority and incompetence, consistent with the assumptions of antipathy theories of prejudice (e.g., social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). On the other hand, complementary gender differentiation stresses the functionality of women in gender-conventional roles and accounts for the view that women are “wonderful” because they are nurturing and supportive (Eagly & Mladinic, 1993).

Finally, heterosexual relations and sexual reproduction highlight the interpersonal interdependence of men and women. The hostile interpretation of this interdependence is that women are purportedly able to “use” sex to control men, whereas the benevolent interpretation asserts that women are a
valuable resource (e.g., essential for true happiness), even if they are (in some ways) inferior.

Both men and women report subscribing to these ideologies, albeit to varying degrees (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Specifically, across six U.S. samples, men consistently scored higher than women on HS, presumably because it is not in women’s self-interest to endorse the hostile components of patriarchy, gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy. Men also scored higher than women on BS (in five out of six samples); however, the gender gap for BS was significantly smaller (Glick & Fiske, 2001). More important, the two subscales were positively correlated in U.S. and cross-cultural samples. The HS–BS correlation, however, was significant for women in 18 out of 19 samples, whereas, it was significant for men in 13 out of 19 samples. Moreover, averaging across the 19 samples, the correlation was significantly stronger for women as compared to men (average \( r = .37 \) versus .23; \( t(18) = 5.02, p < .01 \)), suggesting that the relationship is stronger and more universal among female participants. Why do these attitudes persist even in the face of considerable social changes in gender relations? How, in particular, are women induced to accept these beliefs (even if to a lesser degree than men)?

Men are socially dominant by many measures (e.g., presence in high-status roles, greater income) (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). According to system justification theory, people are motivated to create beliefs that reinforce the status quo, so that they can see the social system in which they live as fair and legitimate (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Therefore system justifying gender ideologies emerge that reflect and stabilize the current system. Hostility alone, however, is a difficult strategy for keeping subordinates in check. This leads dominant groups to prefer paternalistic ideologies toward subordinates in order to justify the hierarchy, through conferring benefits upon subordinates to keep them complacent (Jackman, 1994). Subordinates, ever sensitive to their position and the cultural view, are influenced by status beliefs in their own behavior, and cooperate to maintain amicable conditions (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001). The preference for paternalism as a system justifying strategy is energized and made particularly necessary in the case of gender because the dominant group has especially strong incentives to reward and mollify the subordinate group members on whom they rely, encouraging warmth and cooperation within intimate heterosexual relationships. Thus, BS is strongly rooted in the intimate interdependence of men and women (i.e., within heterosexual romantic relationships). Overtly paternalistic ideologies toward racial and ethnic groups have largely broken down and been exposed as exploitative in contemporary societies (e.g., consider how antiquated as well as racist older depictions of Blacks—e.g., the “Uncle
Tom” type of character in films that preceded the Civil Rights movement or White entertainers’ use of “black-face”—now seem). In contrast, paternalism toward women remains quite strong (e.g., the notion that women ought to be rescued first in emergencies), especially within the context of romantic relationships (e.g., consider the likely reaction to a husband who takes the last seat in the lifeboat, abandoning his wife on a sinking ship).

These paternalistic beliefs about men and women probably also generate acceptance because they can be viewed as flattering toward both sexes. For men, being a “protector and provider” is a much more subjectively positive identity than being an “exploiter” and provides greater legitimacy for their social dominance. For women, the view that they are pure, morally superior, and deserving of men’s protection is also a subjectively positive (even if patronizing) view of their group. Thus, for women, BS potentially solves the conflict between ego justification, group justification, and system justification that Jost and Banaji (1994) suggest afflicts many subordinated groups (for whom justifying the system typically would entail embracing a negative view of themselves and/or their group).

Ambivalent sexism theory builds on the existing theories of gender-based system justification by demonstrating why it is that both hostile and benevolent ideologies contribute to persistent prejudice and discrimination against women. First, although BS is seemingly innocuous, and in certain situations is perceived as beneficial by women as well as men, it is problematic because it is yoked to HS. At the societal level, BS does not exist without HS and the resulting gender inequality. Comparisons of national averages from 19 countries illustrate that benevolent and hostile sexism are highly correlated with one another, and negatively correlated with other indicators of gender equality in economic and political life (Glick, Fiske, et al., 2000). Second, BS is selectively favorable toward women who occupy traditional female roles. Ambivalent sexists reconcile their presumably conflicting ideologies about women by directing benevolent beliefs toward traditional women (idealizing homemakers) and hostile beliefs toward nontraditional women (disliking career women) (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997). Lastly, BS reduces women’s resistance to prejudice and discrimination, because benevolence can be used effectively to justify discriminatory acts (Moya, Glick, Expósito, De Lemus, & Hart, 2007).

Further, recent work reveals that benevolent and hostile sexism are related to a variety of correlates of political ideology. The evidence suggest that these individual differences validate sexism as system support, but in two distinct ways. Hostile sexism relates more to competition for status and power, whereas BS relates more to controlling women. For example, social dominance orientation and the Protestant work ethic (both of which relate
to concerns for status and intergroup competition) predict individuals’ endorsement of HS (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, in press). A symbolic example of how HS relates to diminishing women’s status is that it predicts the likelihood of passing on female- and male-disparaging jokes, as well as how funny men think they are (Thomas & Esses, 2004). In contrast, right-wing authoritarianism, which has been shown to relate to concerns with maintaining control and traditional values, predicts BS (Christopher & Mull, 2006). Also along the lines of control and ambiguity intolerance, intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, and scriptural literalism all positively relate to BS, but not HS (Burn & Busso, 2005), as does Catholicism (Glick, Lameiras, Castro, 2002).

Ambivalently sexist ideologies work together not only to justify gender hierarchy, but to maintain it by providing incentives (BS) for women to fulfill gender-traditional ideals and punishments (HS) for those who seek “too much” status and power. Further, AST, the content of Glick and Fiske’s (1996) measure of ambivalent sexism, and the findings described earlier, are all consistent with the notion that BS accomplishes this goal mainly through the idealization of women within heterosexual romantic relationships and HS by derogating women who pose a threat to men’s status and power, especially in the workplace (where women have increasingly assumed positions of authority). This is not to say that HS is irrelevant within relationships or that BS has no effect on how women are treated in the workplace. Indeed, we argue here that although BS is primarily sustained in contemporary society because of its connection to heterosexual romance, it both serves to legitimize HS and also itself spills over to the treatment of women at work. First, we consider how ambivalent sexism (especially BS) is related to how men and women conceive of and behave in heterosexual romantic relationships. We then consider how the idealization of women in the private realm plays into their exclusion from power and status in the public realm of the workplace.

AMBIVALENT SEXISM AT HOME, IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Formed out of partners’ interdependence, BS functions to maintain that interdependence by depicting men and women as complementary to each other: men need women as caretakers and mothers to their offspring; women need men to provide for them and keep them safe. These benevolent gender ideologies allow people to express positive views of their romantic partners while nevertheless endorsing system justifying beliefs that perpetuate the power differential between men and women by idealizing traditional partners, transplanting men’s greater power in society to heterosexual close relationships.
Benevolent sexism is associated with traditionalism (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Sibley et al., in press). Specifically, BS is negatively related to Schwartz’s (1992) self-direction values and positively associated with traditional values (Feather, 2004). Self-direction values include prioritizing independent thought and action, freedom, and choosing one’s own goals. Traditional values, on the other hand, concern one’s cultural and religious customs. Such traditionalism has very different consequences for women and men. Traditional values within heterosexual romantic relationships emphasize men’s role as protector and provider, which requires success in the wider world. In contrast, traditional values idealize women as homemakers who place home life above worldly success, and BS promises them that they will achieve security and be provided for if they do so. Women high in BS, for example, are more likely to use cosmetics, presumably because they feel dependent on attracting a man who will provide (Franzoi, 2001). Furthermore, women who implicitly associate their partner with chivalrous images show less interest in education and career goals (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). In other words, a woman who tends to think of her partner as a kind of Prince Charming is less likely to pursue high-status or high-paying work. Not surprising then, BS is associated with paternalistic chivalry (Viki, Abrams, & Hutchison, 2003).

Benevolent sexism also predicts evaluations of women (and presumably, men also) depending on how they meet expectations of their gender. They predict both positive responses to women who fulfill traditional female roles (Glick, et al. 1997; Sibley & Wilson, 2004), and negative evaluations of women who violate societal expectations of a chaste and virtuous female, such as women who engage in premarital sex (Sakalli-Ugurlu & Glick, 2003). Benevolent sexism is also related to people’s blaming of victims of acquaintance rape when their initial behavior violates ideals of feminine virtue (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002). Thus, benevolently sexist ideology serves as a control strategy to keep women in check. Within close relationships themselves, this is especially evident in the prescriptions and proscriptions, or rules, that people hold about ideal romantic partners.

Lee, Fiske, and Glick (2007) investigated the intersection of sexist ideologies and close relationship ideals, especially how benevolent ideologies guide personal relationship preferences (in terms of prescriptive and proscriptive expectations of an ideal partner). Previous research has documented consistent gender differences in mate preferences, with men preferring younger women and women preferring men with resources and status (Buss, 1989; Eagly & Wood, 1999). Two studies have empirically linked BS to these gender differences. In one, BS predicted women’s preferences for an older man with good earning potential and men’s preferences for a younger woman who can cook (Eastwick et al., 2005). Likewise, BS predicted women’s tendency to
look for a man with good earning potential and for men to look for a chaste partner (Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002). Lee and colleagues (2007) examined, in addition to these gender differences in close relationship preferences, the rules that individuals establish for their partner, both the desired aspects and the boundaries for undesired characteristics.

Specifically, Lee and colleagues (2007) asked undergraduate students to describe the ideal close relationship partner’s characteristics, including appearance (e.g., face, attractiveness), attributes (e.g., nice, funny), behavior (e.g., communicates with me, challenges me to be better), roles (e.g., confidante, caretaker), and origins (e.g., a particular ethnicity, a particular religious background). A reduced list of prescriptions was compiled from these responses. Likewise, a list of proscriptions was created from participants’ responses to what the ideal partner should not be like or do. A different sample of participants rated the importance of these prescriptions and proscriptions, as well as their agreement with items from the short version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Factor analysis revealed a great deal of overlap between women and men on prescriptive ideals, revealing a few common concerns among men and women. First, a prescription for a traditional partner emerged. In addition, both men and women had some version of a strength prescription (e.g., assertive). A warmth prescription describing a considerate and caring person, and an attractiveness prescription, including general descriptions of physical appeal (e.g., good-looking, striking appearance), were similar for both genders. Finally, women’s preferences revealed a fifth dimension, a romantic prescription for the male partner to be good with kids and to complete her—also consistent with the notion that, due to dependence on men for resources, women have a strong need to assess how willing the male partner is to invest in her and her offspring.

Proscriptive ideals (i.e., clusters of undesirable traits prohibited in partners) received less agreement between the sexes. Both men and women did uphold some “general rejection” criteria, various characteristics that eliminated a potential partner on the spot. For example, an uncaring or manipulative partner would call for prompt rejection. Another concern men and women shared was a partner too stereotypically feminine (e.g., too girly).

The women were generally less likely to endorse sexist ideologies (such as HS and BS) than men. However, to the degree that they were sexist, it more strongly guided women’s partner preferences than it did men’s. Further, BS more strongly related to relationship ideals than did HS. Correlational and regression analyses showed that the perceived importance of most relationship ideals (both prescriptive and proscriptive) held by the female participants related to their belief in BS. The general pattern that emerged from
the analyses revealed that benevolent ideology uniquely explained more variance for more relationship ideals than did hostile ideology, especially for women. More specifically, among women, BS was positively related to desire for a romantic, strong partner who fulfills a traditional male role and is not too feminine, as well as negatively related to an abusive or clingy partner. Perhaps the most disturbing part is that the more a woman endorses benevolently sexist beliefs, the less she rejected partners who might be abusive. Possibly, she requires a higher threshold before considering her partner’s acts as abusive or intolerable. Recent research shows that women who are high in BS were more likely to interpret a romantic partner’s restrictions on their behavior as due to benevolent motives (he loves me and wants to protect me) (Moya, et al., 2007).

In sum, Lee and colleagues’ (2007) study demonstrates that benevolently sexist attitudes influence both men’s and women’s preferences for traditional partners, with stronger effects for women. The pattern of findings reveals that BS is related more strongly to women’s ideals for a traditional partner (described in various ways as romantic, strong, and fulfilling a traditional male role) than men’s ideals, and more than HS guides both men’s and women’s relationship ideals. Although women tend to reject overtly HS, they are more willing to endorse benevolently sexist beliefs (Glick, Fiske, et al., 2000). Women’s endorsement of BS, in turn, predicts their preferences for traditional close relationship partners.

How important are women’s adherence to benevolently sexist beliefs and, relatedly, their traditional partner preferences for the justification and maintenance of gender hierarchy? We suggest that that answer is “extremely!” In cross-national comparisons, women’s endorsement of BS has been found to be strongly related (more so than men’s) to their adherence to other gender-traditional ideologies, including HS (Glick, Fiske, et al., 2000; Glick, Lameiras, Fiske, et al., 2004). A recent longitudinal study more directly suggests that women’s endorsement of BS leads them, over time, to be more likely to embrace HS (Sibley, Overall, & Duckitt, 2006). Finally, mere exposure to BS has been found to increase women’s agreement with general system justifying beliefs (Jost & Kay, 2005). Thus, women’s endorsement of BS (which prominently features the conviction that a male partner will protect and provide for them) seems to be a key ingredient in getting women to accept a traditional role, presumably by sweetening the pot, so that many women are more content to value their domestic roles more than work opportunities outside the home.

In addition to endorsement of BS itself, the traditional relationship values that BS reinforces are also important. The evolutionary view argues that women’s mate preferences have selected men to be hypercompeti-
tive seekers of status and resources, resulting in patriarchy (Trivers, 1972; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Alternatively, the social structural view contends that women’s preferences for powerful male partners is a response to patriarchy, because when women depend on men for resources, they have great incentive to prefer the men who are most successful at amassing them (Eastwick et al., 2005). Whether one embraces either (or both) of these views, women’s partner preferences are important because they increase men’s incentive to compete for status and resources, at the very least perpetuating a system in which men are likely to continue to dominate and to resent women’s forays into powerful work roles (which shifts the balance of power both at work and in relationships, by reducing women’s economic dependence on men).

Thus, women’s benevolently sexist preferences in romantic relationships are intimately connected to sexist beliefs and behaviors that affect women’s participation in the workplace. Benevolently sexist ideals of women in relationships are the flip side of hostile sexist views of the inappropriateness of women valuing careers over home life. The stereotypically sweet traits that suit women to their domestic role conflict with the harsher masculine traits associated with powerful work roles. Women who exhibit these highly masculine traits risk being viewed as unattractive to men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This, in combination with the subjective positivity of benevolently sexist ideals of womanhood, leads many women to accept BS and the notion that a powerful male partner (rather than an independent career) will protect and provide for their well-being. In the next section, we explore how the BS associated with the home sometimes spills over into the workplace, but also serves as a justification within the workplace context for the HS that excludes women from powerful work roles.

AMBIVALENT SEXISM IN THE WORKPLACE

By some accounts, women have closed the gender gap in the professional realm. In the United States, women constitute 46% of the paid labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006a) and 50% of paid managers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006b). In 2004, 51% of the bachelor degrees awarded went to women, as did 52% of advanced degrees, 35% of professional degrees, and 33% of doctorate degrees (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004). However, in Fortune 500 companies, women represent only 15.6% of top officers, and 6.7% of most highly paid officers (Catalyst, 2006). In Congress, only 14% of Senators and 15% of Congressional Representatives are female (Center for the American Woman and Politics, 2006). Clearly, the ratio of women in powerful leadership positions falls disturbingly short of the population’s ratio.
Some research suggests that these disparities originate in the difficulty some individuals have in reconciling their beliefs about women and their beliefs about the nature of elite professional positions. Like stereotypes about social groups, occupation stereotypes are seen as having well-defined gender and status dimensions. Participants’ images of job types load on two orthogonal factors: prestige and gender type (Glick, Wilk, & Perreault, 1995). However, specific gender-related attributes (e.g., masculine personality traits) load on the perceived occupational prestige factor, indicating that these attributes are more closely related to prestige than to perceived gender-type of the job. Indeed, masculine traits predict the prestige and salary of jobs (Glick, 1991). Thus, if employers have to hire someone for a prestigious position, they are more likely to value masculine qualities and therefore more likely to look for a man as the appropriate candidate.

Unfortunately, despite the overall subjective positiveness of stereotypes about women, which tend to be more favorable than stereotypes about men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1993), the traits assigned to women are not those that are typically valued at work (especially for prestigious jobs). Social-role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that gendered division of labor is the source of the favorable elements of stereotypes about women; women are associated with domestic roles (e.g., mother), which require communal qualities (e.g., warmth, patience), whereas men are associated with high-status roles (e.g., professional), which require agentic traits (e.g., competence, independence). This theory is consistent with the notion that benevolently sexist beliefs are rooted in women’s domestic and relationship roles and that these beliefs, in turn, lead people to view women as less suited to high-status jobs outside the home. Although the content of stereotypes for women are subjectively positive, they are low in status. In a workplace situation, this means that women are favored for low-status, feminine jobs, which include support positions that serve, mainly, male superiors (e.g., secretary) or paid versions of women’s traditional domestic role (e.g., day care worker). When BS spills over into the workplace, women may be seen as warmer, but are presumed to be less competent than men, so that women are confined to feminine and low-status roles. Additionally, BS in the workplace may elicit patronizing discrimination (Glick & Fiske, 2007), which includes but is not limited to handicapping via overhelping, taking over, and limiting the responsibilities of targets (Rudman, Glick, & Phelan, 2007).

Patronizing discrimination, which is embedded in BS, maintains the dominant group’s higher status. The double-edged nature of patronizing discrimination is precisely what makes BS so insidious. It is not overtly hostile and, in many cases, is seemingly beneficial to the recipient. Furthermore, the perpetrator may think he is helping the recipient. Women may accept
paternalistic gestures either because they are not aware that they reinforce the notion that women are suitable only for low-status roles, or because they understand that to cooperate and accept benevolent gestures is a better alternative to enduring overt hostility.

Consider the consequences of refusing benevolent gestures or violating feminine norms. If a woman elects to reject patronizing assistance, she is seen uncooperative. As a result, the benefits of paternalism reserved for women who stick to traditional gendered behavior are revoked, and backlash rooted in HS can take its place. This is the paradox that women face in performance settings: they have to provide strong counter-stereotypical information (e.g., that they are agentic and competent) in order to demonstrate that they are qualified for high-status professional roles (Glick, Zion, & Nelson, 1988), but this deviation from prescribed and proscribed gender norms can elicit a backlash effect (Rudman, 1998). Manifestations of backlash effects include hiring discrimination (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004), being judged more harshly (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), being sabotaged (Rudman & airchild, 2004), and being sexually harassed (Fiske & Glick, 1995). Research demonstrates that endorsement of HS, but not BS, is related to more negative evaluations and recommendations for female candidates for management positions, but more positive recommendations for male candidates (Masser & Abrams, 2004). Moreover, women are bound by workplace culture norms; research indicates that the social costs of making attributions to discrimination prevent stigmatized individuals from dealing with instances in which they have been discriminated against (Kaiser & Miller, 2001).

Gender stereotypes in concert with ambivalent sexism breed hostility toward men as well. Benevolent attitudes toward men are based on the belief that men must be instrumental and protective, whereas hostile attitudes toward men are based on resentment of men’s social dominance (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Although HS is the origin of harassment for both genders, the motivation the backlash against men and women differs. Women’s harassment of men comes from female offenders’ needs to challenge male dominance, whereas harassment of women arises from the need to reinforce female subordinate status (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996). Same-sex sexual harassment of men occurs because targeted men do not fit offenders’ gender-role stereotypes of heterosexual hypermasculinity; therefore these men incur backlash effects similar to those of women who deviate from gender norms (Stockdale, Visio, & Batra, 1999).

Working mothers pose a paradox all their own. Research from the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) demonstrates that homemakers are seen as cooperative and having low status and are therefore characterized as warm, but not competent. On the other hand, female
professionals are seen as competitive and having high status and are therefore characterized as competent, but not warm. Glick and colleagues (1997) have found that ambivalent sexists often reconcile their polarized attitudes toward women by reserving benevolence for traditional women (e.g., homemakers) and hostility for nontraditional women (e.g., business women).

What happens when a mother, normally a target of benevolence and paternalistic prejudice, works in a setting where women are more often the target of hostility and envious prejudice? Professional women exchange their perceived competence for perceived warmth when they become mothers. Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2004) found that a woman with a child was not only perceived as less competent than a woman without a child, she was perceived as less competent than she was before becoming a mother. Moreover, competence predicted the likelihood that participants would hire, promote, or further train an employee, whereas warmth did not, indicating that the gain in warmth does not aid women, but the loss in competence does detract from their appeal as an employee. Thus, having a child changes the stereotypes that are associated with that woman, placing her in the domestic, warm, and incompetent category, making her seem unfit for the work force. More recently, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) demonstrated another possible consequence of becoming a working mother. In this study, penalties toward competent (but cold) women were reduced when participants learned that the target was a mother. In this case, becoming a mother did not lead to a direct warmth–competence trade-off. Still, this finding again demonstrates how difficult it is for women to be seen as simultaneously warm and competent in the absence of explicit evidence that they are fulfilling gender-prescribed roles (e.g., mother). Working mothers are not the only case in which women’s gender role inhibits the perception of their work role, because gender is such a salient social category (Fiske, 1998).

Sex role spillover (Gutek & Morasch, 1982) is the merging of gender roles with work roles. In male-dominated settings, sex role and work role merge for men by mere association, whereas women are highlighted as the visible minority because their gender is incongruent with the sex role normally associated with the job (Gutek & Cohen, 1987). Making gender salient activates associated status beliefs, which can lead perceivers to question a woman’s qualifications, e.g., “She must be an affirmative action hire.” Additionally, women in nontraditional jobs experience more aggressive manifestations of sex role spillover in the form of sexual overtures and harassment because “woman as sex object” is another obvious element of their sex role (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). A hostile interpretation of heterosexual intimacy can lead perceivers to infer that female coworkers acquired their positions illegitimately (e.g., by sleeping with a superior), because sexuality is supposedly
the domain in which women have the perceived ability to control men. Being perceived as “sexy” can elicit hostile reactions and lead people to perceive sexual harassment as justified (Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). Although women are less tolerant of harassment than men are, ambivalent sexism and hostility toward women predicts tolerance above and beyond gender (Russell & Trigg, 2004).

Unfortunately, being seen as submissive can also lead to exploitation (Richard, Rollerson, & Phillips, 1970). Because women do not believe that they can be seen simultaneously as competent and sexual (Gutek, 1989), flirtatiousness and harassment have negative consequences for women’s self-confidence (Satterfield & Muehlenhard, 1997). Moreover, if women internalize the objectification, it can impact their future performance (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

The pernicious effects of benevolent and hostile attitudes, however subtle, have critical implications for gender relations and ratios in the workplace. Ambivalent sexism theory provides a useful framework by which to approach these issues and offers a way to explicate the intricacies of system justification enacted by women and men in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

We have suggested that ambivalent sexism shapes system maintaining behavior in both the private and public spheres, though neither is earthly heaven nor purgatory as the two sides of the suffrage movement predicted. Our central contention here is that the system justifying attitudes and the resulting discrimination that restricts women in the public sphere cannot be properly understood without considering well-entrenched, benevolently sexist beliefs about women’s and men’s roles in romantic relationships and home life. These romanticized ideals remain strong in contemporary society and—because they flatter each sex, although in very different ways—continue to be attractive to both women and men.

Because of its subjectively positive tenor, BS seems harmless. Further, because it primarily reflects attitudes about women and men in romantic relationships, it hardly seems like a prime candidate for explaining why women face a glass ceiling at work. Yet, benevolently sexist ideals reinforce the view that women’s priority should be hearth and home, as well as that men ought to excel in the competitive world of work, so that they can effectively protect and provide for their female dependents. These system justifying beliefs not only set up the “soft bigotry of low expectations” for women as leaders, but the hard bigotry of backlash against women who fail to live up to benevolently sexist prescriptions. Hostile sexism and the exclusion of women who
seek or obtain power and status in the public realm is legitimated and justified by those seemingly innocuous, subjectively benevolent and romantic ideals of women as fragile damsels and men as their white knights. However, if we document the consequences of hostile and benevolent attitudes and emphasize the importance of social structure, individuals may be able to reduce the fallout of these system justifying beliefs both in the home and at work. Disadvantage need not lead to system justification, and we would encourage resistance rather than denial or avoidance (e.g., see Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003).

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